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TAGS: PGOV PHUM RS

SUBJECT: RUSSIA: TATARS CALL NEW FEDERAL TREATY "SYMBOLIC"

Classified By: PolMinCouns Alice G. Wells. Reason: 1.4 (b, d)

¶1. (C) Tatarstani officials and academics alike told us July 6-7 that the federal treaty between Tatarstan and Russia, now before the Federation Council, is only "symbolic." The issues of practical substance -- primarily division of state property -- were settled in the original 1994 treaty, according to President Shaymiyev's senior political advisor Rafael Khakimov, political scientist Nail Mukharryamov and the head of Tatarstan's external relations department, Eduard Khabibullin. The new treaty symbolizes the nation's commitment to federalism despite the rhetoric of the "vertical of power," they said.

¶2. (C) All believed the Federation Council's rejection of a previous draft of the new treaty was pure politics -- Sergei Mironov's need to stake out political turf as leader of a political party in opposition to the ruling United Russia. Khakimov spun Tatarstan's concessions in the new draft as minimal: a recognition that Russia's laws, not only its constitution and that of Tatarstan, would be supreme in the republic; and a dilution of the official language clause to require only that the President and senior officials be bilingual in Tatar and Russian.

¶3. (C) Comment: The fact that Tatarstan is interested in the Treaty despite its purely "symbolic" value shows concern that the new rulers in Moscow after 2008 might seek to reduce Tatar autonomy. Given the highly personal nature of all such deals, the Tatars want the treaty to lock in the gains they have made so far. In contrast, Chechnya's rough-hewn president Ramzan Kadyrov has made it clear that he needs no stinkin' piece of paper to guarantee his freedom of movement -- and that a formal treaty might only constrain him when he presses Putin's successor for even more concessions.

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